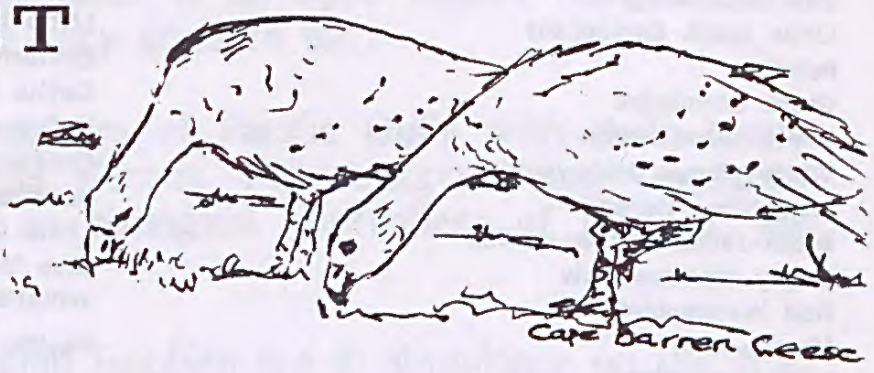
CASTLEMAINE NATURALIST

May 1996

Vol 20.4 #222



Laanacoorie Res. Outing

Twelve members met under a grey sky for our trip to Laanacoorie, via Bells Swamp, under the leadership of Kay Turner and George Broadway. However our enthusiasm was somewhat dampened by the time we arrived at Bells Swamp and the rain started. By the time we reached Laanacoorie it had really set in, with no sign of abating. By mutual consent we abandoned the trip and went our separate ways.

Two cars were last seen heading for home, but my passengers persuaded me (who am I to argue against the 3 ladies - Maureen, Margaret B. and Jessie H.?) to have a look at the res. whilst we were this far over. The rain became heavier and birdwatching became rather difficult, confined to the car with fogged up, rain spattered windows, but, undaunted, we pressed onwards. We were rewarded however at the spillway of the res. by seeing a Pelican and 4 Little Black Cormorants feeding vigorously (where are the fishing rods when you need them?!). We found a shelter from the rain, had a cuppa, and made a start for home.

It was then that all the previous optimism was rewarded. The rain eased and then stopped altogether, and the birds came out in their numbers, including Little and Great Cormorants, Intermediate Egrets, Black-faced Cuckoo-shrikes, Dusky Woodswallows, Striated Pardalotes, Jacky Winter, Cattle Egret, Yellow-billed Spoonbill, Little Grebe, Whistling Kites, and a flock of Little Friarbirds.

We returned to Castlemaine at 5.30pm after a very enjoyable trip after all, and a bird count of 43 different species.

Bird List for Laanacoorie Outing

Welcome Swallow
Grey Shrike-thrush
Brown Falcon
Common Bronze-wing
Masked Lapwing
Crimson Rosella
Australian Raven
Magpie
Galah
Willie Wagtail
Sacred Ibis
White-winged Chough
Eastern Yellow Robin
Noisy Miner

Purple Swamp Hen
Intermediate Egret
Little Black Cormorant
Pelican
Great Cormorant
White-faced Heron
White-plumed Honeyeater
Long-billed Corella
Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike
Dusky Woodswallow
Red Wattlegbird
Magpie-lark
Dusky Moorhen
Black Swan
Striated Pardalote
Jacky Winter
White-throated Treecreeper
Little Pied Cormorant
Eastern Rosella
Cattle Egret
Yellow-billed Spoonbill
Crested Pigeon
Kookaburra
Little Grebe
Blue Wren
Whistling Kite
Pacific Black Duck

Ken Dredge

Flinders Island

Flinders is the largest island in the Furneaux group, which, with several smaller groups, are scattered across Bass Straight between Wilsons Promontory and the North-east tip of Tasmania. There are about forty islands in the Furneaux group, with the main population on Flinders. The scenery is spectacular, with great mountains of granite rising straight from sea level to a series of fantastic peaks up to 756m (Mt Strezlecki). The undulating central area has been cleared for grazing, and produces fine wool and beef. The coastal regions have remained largely unspoiled, with original vegetation - ancient groves of the beautiful Drooping Sheoak (Allocasurina verticillata) and extensive heathlands including grass trees. There are diverse and interesting plant communities everywhere, from sheltered mountain gullies with tree ferns, Sassafrass, Blackwoods, Tasmanian Blue Gums, wattles, Native Pine (Callitris rhomboidea), melaleucas, kunzeas and dense thickets of ti-tree; to salt bush and spinifex tussocks; and wetlands with sedges and rushes, and a wealth of wildflowers including 80 species of orchids.

Within this relatively small area (the island is about 80km in length, and 30 km wide) there is a diversity of habitat for many different species of birds - over 150 species have been recorded, including 8 Tasmanian endemics.

The fresh and saline swamps, estuaries and tidal flats are an acknowledged part of the wetland systems protected by the 'JAMBA' agreement between Japan and Australia particularly for the protection of migratory birds, and the world-wide 'RAMSCAR' Convention. Flocks of up to 3000 Curlew Sandpipers and three to four thousand individuals of other migratory species have been observed at Logans Lagoon and Camerons Inlet.

As we drove around the few roads in our hired mini-bus we watched large flocks of handsome grey Cape Barren Geese with their bright pink

legs and black feet, grazing peacefully with sheep and cattle. At times when the population builds up there is an open season to reduce the numbers. They are said to be very good to eat.

There were also great numbers of Pacific Gulls with their brown juveniles, lapwings, White-faced Herons, Forest Ravens and Tasmanian Black Currawongs, all acting as biological controllers of pastoral and other pests.

Brown Falcons and Australian Hobbies are in abundance on the drier plains country towards the north of the island. There are no foxes or rabbits on the island, and many of the residents own flocks of turkeys and some peacocks which can be seen wandering around the pastures.

Around the units in which we stayed were native shrubs and eucalypts in flower, resulting in some competition between Green Rosellas and New Holland and Black-headed Honeyeaters for the nectar. Superb Blue-wrens were numerous and friendly and a Grey Shrike-thrush came occasionally and tapped on the kitchen window to attract attention. At night we heard boobooks calling nearby, but never managed to find them.

The island is rich in history, and the small museum at Emita contains a fascinating array of relics, photographs and literature pertaining to all aspects of life in tha area. There is also a superb shell collection, and a rare display of birds eggs arranged in the clutches relevant to each species from two tiny pure white eggs of the Forty-spotted Pardalote through to those of the various land and sea birds to the large emu eggs.

This part of Australia is well known as one of the main breeding grounds of Short-tailed Shearwaters, or Mutton Birds. At this time of year (March) the chicks are almost fully grown, and the parents ready to begin the long migratory flight back to the northern hemisphere. The route followed has been roughly plotted from Australia to New Zealand, north-west across the Pacific, east of the Philippines to Japan, and across the Bering Sea to America and down the west coast until, opposite San Francisco, they set off for Australia again.. They spend our winter in the food rich seas off southern Kamcatchka, the Aleutian Islands and the Bering sea, where they moult - covering the sea with feathers !

The earliest description of these birds was recorded by Captain Matthew Flinders near the Furneaux group in 1803. "There was a stream of from 50 - 80 yards in depth, and of 300 yards or more in breadth," wrote Flinders, "The birds were not scattered, but flying as compactly as free movement of their wings seemed to allow. During a

full hour and a half this stream of petrels continued to pass us. On the lowest computation I think the number could not have been less than a hundred million."

One evening we left the fishing village of Lady Barron where we stayed, to board a small game fishing boat, "Strait Lady" and cruise out among the neighbouring islands to watch a spectacular sunset. We then waited around for the Mutton Birds to come in to Great Dog Island, where a single offspring awaited in each burrow. Like penguins, they will only land after dark, but return in late afternoon to wait, just offshore, in extensive rafts until dusk, when they fly in unerringly to their own burrows. (Since dawn they have flown an average of 30 - 50 kms to gather krill to feed the young.)

We cruised around to locate some of these rafts of birds, endeavouring not to disturb them. As the sun disappeared and the sky and sea darkened we came in close to the shore of Great Dog where the air was filled with descending birds. They were visible in large numbers, against the lighter horizon where the sun had set, but more distinctly through binoculars. There seemed to be thousands on this island alone. When we left after half an hour, they were still coming in.

The harvesting of hundreds of thousands of mature chicks still takes place under permit on some of the islands for one month each year from mid-March. The adults have usually left by then, leaving the chicks to follow within a few weeks if they escape the harvesting. There is a reseach station on a small island near Lady Barron, and birds are banded and constant population surveys are made. Some have returned to the same burrows on Great Dog Island for almost 40 years, and according to the research there has been no great decline in numbers.

Some of our party decided to sample Mutton Bird on the menu one evening when we dined at the local tavern, but on reflecting on the heroic qualities of these splendid birds I hadn't the heart (or stomach!) to join them. My appetite was confined to the excellent lobster and a variety of other delicious seafood for which the island is also famous.

Shirley Parnaby

Sandon Bird List for March

White-faced Heron
Brown Falcon
Masked Lapwing
Galah
Crimson Rosella
Eastern Rosella
Australian Owlet-nightjar (h)
Kookaburra
White-throated Tree-creeper
Wren
Spotted Pardalote
Striated Pardalote
Speckled Warbler
Weebill
Brown,
Buff-rumped,
Yellow-rumped and
Striated Thornbills

Southern Whiteface
Red Wattlebird
Yellow-tufted Honeyeater
Brown-headed Honeyeater
Jacky Winter
Scarlet Robin
Eastern Yellow Robin
White-browed Babbler
Varied Sitella
Golden Whistler (imm. 1/3)
Grey Shrike-thrush
Restless Fly-catcher
Australian Magpie-lark
Grey Fantail
Willie Wagtail
Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike
Olive-backed Oriole (26/3)
Australian Magpie
Grey Currawong
Australian Raven
White-winged Chough
Red-browed Firetail
Diamond Firetail
Welcome Swallow

Susanna Starr

Birds at 61 Hunter Street Mar/Apr

Several groups of Tasmanian Silvereyes have dropped in over recent weeks to freshen up in the bird bath, then feast on figs and grapes before continuing on their way to winter on the Gold Coast (Well, southern Queensland, anyway).

The New Holland and Yellow-faced Honeyeaters seem to be permanent residents these days.

A Restless Flycatcher was perched on the power-line in the front garden amidst a long line of Sparrows. He looked out of place, but the Sparrows ignored him.

A new visitor to the garden is a juvenile Grey Shrike-thrush, and we appreciate his vocal efforts.

A group of noisy Corellas were around for a few days and the Crimson and Eastern Rosellas have both kept up contant inspections of the nest box where the Easterns have reared two families in the past two seasons. There are great shrieking contests on these occasions.

Other birds around the garden are Magpies, Blackbirds, Red Wattlebird, Silvereyes, Yellow-rumped Thornbells, hoards of Sparrows and a few Starling visitors.

Shirley Parnaby.

Observations for April

* A Koala has been on the property at Sandon on 10th and 11th of March and again on April 12. S.S.
* A flock of 26 Wood ducks have been in the paddock opposite at North Castlemaine since Duck Opening. R.M.
* For the first time in seven years no Musk Lorikeets have been seen on the property at Yapeen. M.P.
* In Harcourt orchards ravens have been piercing apples once and allowing wasps to feed inside undetected until they are picked. G.B.

* Calici virus: only 3 rabbits were seen on the meeting night between Walmer and Castlemaine. Usuallly they are numerous. M.D.
* Five Little Friarbirds were seen on the Tullaroop island on Easter Monday. K.T.
* A flock of 26 Mynahs was seen on 21 April , near Harcourt Post Office. E.P.
* Orchids in flower at Muckleford on 24 April were Autumn Greenhood (*Pterostylus revoluta*), Parsons Bands (*Eriochilus cucullatus*), Autumn Midge Orchid (*Genoplesium* afin. *rufum*) and Red-tip Green-hood (*Pterostylus* afin. *parviflora*) . Red-tip Greenhood is a new record for the district's plant list. Tall Greenhoods will soon be in flower. E.P.
* Magpies were seen chasing Galahs at Harcourt. B.E.
* This is the first year that thornbills, mostly Yellow-rumped, have actually been seen at the house at Mt Alexander. M.H.
* A huge flock of Straw-necked Ibis in V formation was seen flying over the town. A large flock had been seen in paddocks at Harcourt the day before. G.B.
* A mixed group of Magpies, Wood Ducks, Masked Lawpings and Mudlarks have been all finding something very interesting to eat on the rise opposite the house for about a week. R.M.
* A Black-shouldered Kite was seen at Harcourt. An Eastern Spine-bill was seen in the garden in Thomas Street for the first time for quite a long while. M.W.
* Eight Whistling Kites were seen at Joyces Creek during a U3A outing recently. M.W. S.S.
* A very confused Crab-apple in Farnsworth St. has fruit, flowers, and autumn colouring all at the same time. J.H.
* Orchids at Sandon. First seen on 29/3 - Dark Midge Orchid (*Genoplesium* afin. *rufum*) , Parsons Bands (*Eriochilus cucullatus*) and Autumn Greenhood (*Pterostylus revoluta*) 31/3 - Tiny Greenhood (*P.* affin. *parviflora*) Variable Midge Orchid (*G. archeri*). S.S.
* Crested Shrike-tits at Spring Gully, between Campbells Creek and Chewton, along with many other birds. M.W.

Correction Last month it was stated that the new area for the Eltham Copper Butterfly was bought by the Commissioners. This was only partly correct. The Shire did contribute $5000, and DCNR $20,000, but the Trust for Nature, (Victoria) were the ones who actually purchased the site after lengthy negotiations with the former owner since Sept. '94. The Trust will continue to own the land, and it will be managed by the Shire as an adjuct to the Botanic Gardens specifically for the conservation of the butterfly. Ed.

N.B. The Eltham Copper Butterfly larvae and symbiotic ants can be seen during September and October. E.P.

Question corner

COPPER BUTTERFLY AREA

Why have blue ribbons been placed around plants in parts of the western section of the botanic gardens?

A series of projects are underway, which are researching various aspects of the biology of the Eltham Copper Butterfly. In one project, at Castlemaine, a team of botanists, led by David Cameron, has set up two 30 metre by 30 metre quadrats. In each quadrats, a list of plants present has been made. Special attention has been paid to the bursaria bushes. Bursaria is the food plant of the butterfly larvae, and all of the bursaria plants in both of the quadrats has been counted. For each plant, the height, position in the quadrat, and species, has been recorded. Two species are involved, *Bursaria spinosa* and *B. lasiophylla*. As the bursarias were recorded, a blue plastic tag was tied around the bush. The ribbons are made of biodegradable plastic. In each quadrat there is a surprising number of bursaria plants present. One quadrat has over 180 plants in the 30 by 30 metre square. The other has about twice this. Follow-up surveys will be carried out in future years.

Plants not previously recorded in Victoria as weed species have been identified in the western part of the gardens. At least 4 species of pine are present. The introduced pines include *Pinus sabiniana* (Digger Pine), *P. halepensis* (Aleppo Pine), *P. pinea* (Stone Pine) and *P. radiata* (Monterey Pine). *Phillyrea latifolia* (Phillyrea), *Rhamnus alaternus* (Italian Buckthorn), *Junperus oxycedrus* (Prickly Juniper) and a range of *Cotoneaster* species are also present.

The Eltham Copper Butterfly is now found in only three areas of Victoria. These are at Eltham, Castlemaine and Kiata. The rainfall, and general plant associations present in these three areas at first sight appear to be dissimilar. The research being carried out will help in getting an understanding of the relationships between the areas.

The effect of fire on a butterfly colony is not known. Discussion about the desirability of burning a site is taking place. A burn, if carried out, would probably be at one of the Eltham colonies. It would give invaluable information about management of the butterfly areas.

Since surveys began over the past few years at Castlemaine, the butterflies have extended their known range, and a colony is near the crest close to the old slate quarry. An additional piece of land between the existing reserve and Odgers Road has been bought by the Trust For Nature, with a contribution from the Shire Council. Larvae have been recorded in this land. The extension of the range, and the additional area of the gardens, will make the butterfly population more secure from a wildfire, in that it is likely that at least part of the colony would be unburned.

E.P.

Expression of interest!

The club has decided to go down to Allan Ried's property as the outing on October 12, for an overnight stay. Allan can accommodate 12 in cottage accommodation. Cars will leave in the morning of the 12th and return on the afternoon of the 13th. Details are still to be decided.

If you would be interested in going please let the Secretary know.

Ecological tours by Gary Cheers.

Ecological tours of the Grampians for small groups of 3 to 5 people are being started by Gary from the beginning of May. For details either see the Secretary or ring Gary on 612970.

CASTLEMAINE F.N.C. PROGRAM

N.B. Excursions leave promptly at times stated.
General Meetings are held at Continuing Education, Templeton Street.

Fri May 10 **Waders in Siberia** Speaker is Bruce Douglas. Cont. Ed. 8pm.

Sat May 11 **Terrick Terrick** All day excursion. Leave 27 Doveton St. at 9.30am. Take lunch, pm tea, binoculars.

Thurs May **Thursday Birdwatching** Meet at Cont.Ed. car park at 9.30am.

Fri June 14 **"Seed collection and propagation", and "Rehabilitation of mined areas".** Speaker is Marilyn Sprague.

Sat June 15 **Falls at Malmsbury** on private property. Leader, B. Maund.

Fri July 12. **Some Birds of the Castlemaine District** Program by Club members. Chris Morris, local honeyeaters; George Broadway, cuckoos; Ern Perkins, thornbills; Brenda Envall, swallows and swifts; Rita Mills, Frogmouths, nightjars; Kay Turner and Maggie Oliver, flycatchers; Susanna Starr and Bob Webb, White-winged Choughs.

Sat July 13. **Mount Alexander** The new walking track for the agile, and Koala Park for others. Leaders E. Perkins and R. Mills.

Fri Aug 9. **Turkey and its Wildflowers.** Speaker is Hillary Weatherhead.

Sat,Sun Oct 12 & 13 **Alan Reid's property.** See note p.7.

Fri Nov 8 **Plants of the Ballarat District** Speaker is Ern Perkins

Sat Nov 9 **Ballarat area.** Leader E. Perkins.

Sat Dec. 14. **Discovery walk** from the Shire boundary to Barringhup along the Carisbrook/Baringhup road, (approx 5-6 km).

****

Committee: C. Morris (Pres.), G. Broadway (V.P.), M. Willis (Interim Sec.), B. Envall (Treas.), K. Turner (Prog.), R.Mills (P.O. & N/L Ed.), E. Perkins, M. Oliver, B. Maund, J. Hewetson, M. Dredge.

Meetings:-

General - Second Friday every month (except Jan) at **Continuing Education, Templeton St.** at 8 pm.

Business - Held on the 4th Thursday every month (except Dec.) at 38 Campbell Street at 7.30pm. **All Members are invited to attend.**

Subscriptions - 1996

Ordinary Membership: single $14 Family $20

Pensioner/Student: Single $10 Family $16.

Supporting $25

Newsletter posted: Membership + $6

****

Castlemaine Field Naturalists' Club Inc.
P.O. Box 324, Castlemaine, 3450.